

The Ambiguity of "Ivan Ilych"

VICTOR BROMBERT

DOES TOLSTOY, in his late years, load the dice for the sake of teaching a moral lesson? Does he leave room for any ambivalence, for any genuine irony? Edward Wasiolek, the distinguished scholar of Russian literature, reported years ago that his students, fed on Henry James's belief that reality had myriad forms, used to complain that Tolstoy's famous story "The Death of Ivan Ilych" was arbitrary, preachy, painfully lacking in ambiguity and "levels of meaning."

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1886) is in fact deceptively simple. Written years after *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, this powerful narrative about dying and death is remarkable for its brevity, its succinctness, its ordinariness. The narrator himself comments on this apparent banality at the beginning of the story: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary, and therefore most terrible." The tragic dimension of this work is thus from the outset attributed to a very common life experience. The title itself provides obvious signals: "Ivan Ilych"—it is hard to imagine a more unremarkable first name and patronymic. It is like calling the protagonist John Smith or Everyman. And nothing could be more common or widespread than "Death," the first word of the title, a word that in Russian comes bluntly without a definite article, a reminder of a stark and generalized human condition, so generalized indeed as to exclude uniqueness.

All of us, Tolstoy might say, cherish the illusion that we are unique. Ivan Ilych recalls that in school he had learned from a textbook the syllogistic formula "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal." But what logically applied to Caius and to all the Caiuses of this world did not apply to him. He was special, after all—or so he had felt until now. He was not Caius; he was Ivan, or Vanya as his mother used to call him, and a very special Vanya at that. But now that his body is failing and the terror of death has become a

daily reality, he can no longer avoid staring into the face of a common destiny. In this new awareness of a common law, a common doom, he feels more lonely than ever. As he lies on his deathbed, he hears the sounds of merriment in his household, the sounds of singing and laughter. He almost chokes with anger. "But they will die too! Fools! I first, and they later. . ." For they too will have to recognize the truth of the terrible law.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that Ivan Ilych's entire professional life has been involved with the law. Ivan Ilych is a judge, and, as such, he supposedly represents and administers the law. The story begins in fact under the sign of the law, in the building of the Law Courts, during an interval between sessions. The judges and the public prosecutor relax, chatting smugly about the latest news and indulging in professional gossip concerning promotions, replacements, and salaries.

The reader is quickly alerted to a deeper irony. For the notion of "law" functions at different levels, and conveys disparate, even conflicting meanings, all of which come into play in Tolstoy's story. There are strictly legal laws, but also social and moral laws. There are biological and physical laws. And there are transcendental and religious laws, which place an individual's life on trial, and are in no way subject to the jurisdiction of worldly judges.

The big subject of conversation that day among the judges assembled in the chambers of the Law Courts is a newspaper report that their colleague Ivan Ilych has died. Typically, the news is greeted with perfunctory compassion and trivial concerns. Various voices inquire about the cause of the death, while everyone secretly hopes that this death will entail some personal advantage. Everyone also feels complacently that death does not really concern him. "It is he who is dead and not I."



Although the story appears to stress in an unbookish manner the clinical realities of dying, Tolstoy's unstated cultural references invite us to consider "The Death of Ivan Ilych" as a meditation on

mortality. Ashes shall return to ashes. The Bible—in Ecclesiastes, in the book of Job, in many other places—tells of the vanity of human endeavors, of the mystery of suffering and death. Naked shall man return to go as he came, says the voice in Ecclesiastes. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. Only fools are drawn to the house of mirth. For desire shall fail and inevitably the living shall go to their “long home.” Job also knows that man goes down to the grave, that his days are determined, that he must waste away and die. But there are more distinctly literary and philosophical echoes. Did not Socrates, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, assert that philosophers concerned themselves above all with dying and death? The stoic tradition, echoed centuries later by Montaigne, stresses the point. Inspired by Seneca, Montaigne devotes an entire essay to the proposition “That to philosophize is to learn to die.” And Pascal, in his defense of the Christian faith, develops a disquieting metaphor of life as a death sentence. We are all on death row. Imagine, says Pascal, men in chains, all condemned to die, watching their fellows being butchered while awaiting their turn with grief and despair. “This is an image of the human condition.”

Tolstoy’s singular achievement is that he conveys Ivan Ilych’s terror in the face of death not in philosophical or abstract terms, but as a subjective and visceral experience. The sweat of fear becomes the protagonist’s body language. Tolstoy himself, since his earliest years, had been obsessed with the specter of death and the dread of dying—a dread Levin in *Anna Karenina* gets to know in wretched detail as he watches his tubercular brother Nicolay in the last stages of physical disintegration. Rainer Maria Rilke comments on Tolstoy’s profound and helpless fear, on his conviction that “death in the pure state” exists, and that we must drink, from the hateful cup, the bitterness of “undiluted death.” The awful truth of dying comes as a confrontation with an unfathomable mystery.

Tolstoy knew that fear and trembling remain supremely personal, that the discovery of death is made in utter solitude. Yet the sense of dereliction also comes with the awareness of a common destiny and a common humanity. Ivan Ilych is not a tragic figure. He is

no King Lear, but in his illness, like Lear driven mad, he discovers that he too is not “ague-proof,” that his hand, which his courtiers used to kiss, smells of mortality.

The crucial question for Tolstoy is how we face this revelation, what it tells us about the way we have lived. Ivan Ilych learns—the lesson may come too late—that emptiness, self-deception, and false values have been at the core of his life, that in the process of living we all deny the truth of our human condition, that we lie to ourselves when we pretend to forget about death, and that this lie is intimately bound up with all the other lies that vitiate our moral being. It is a denunciation of a spiritual void.

Tolstoy first intended to narrate the progression of the terminal illness in the first person, in the form of a diary. He changed his mind, and wrote his story as a third-person narrative. This decision allowed him to complicate the narrative process, to stand both inside and outside his character, to blend the objective and the subjective, and to universalize what was essentially an intense private experience. Had Tolstoy described the months of suffering from the exclusive point of view of the dying man, he would have isolated the case, limiting the range and impact of an experience that the reader could then all too easily attribute to one sick man’s fear and bitterness. The third-person narrative made it possible to transcend the individual experience, to translate it into a universal reality, to abolish all lines of demarcation between object and subject, and to link the disturbed reader (and writer) to Ivan Ilych’s distress.

For “The Death of Ivan Ilych” is not limited to an individual case. The mediation and transfer achieved by the third-person narration involve the narrator and the reader, both of whom participate as Ivan Ilych stares into the grim reality of *It* (in Russian, the feminine pronoun *Ona*: she, because the word for death, *smert’*, is feminine). Once before, in a major work of Tolstoy, the lethal confrontation with *It* (*Ona*) occurs. It comes at the precise moment of Prince Andrey’s death in *War and Peace*, at the end of his long agony after being wounded at the battle of Borodino. “Behind the door stood *It* [. . .]. Once more *It* was pressing the door from without [. . .]. *It*

comes in and it is death. And Prince Andrey died." The epiphanic vision of death haunts Tolstoy. Still, it is only in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" that the grim vision is artfully related to the temporal structure of the narrative. The story ends with death. It also begins with it: the newspaper announcement, the gossip in the Law Courts, the presence of the corpse in the house of mourning, the trivial and hypocritical decorum of the assembled mourners.

Tolstoy could have proceeded chronologically, telling us about Ivan Ilych's childhood, adolescent pranks, early career moves, and his settling into what was quickly to become a stale marriage. Instead he begins his story just after Ivan Ilych's death. This posthumous perspective creates an open-ended structure. It points to a future, if not for the protagonist, then at least for those who survive him in the story, as well as for the reader.



But first, Tolstoy trivializes the immediate postmortem events, exposing the survivors' sham. It is a judgment on the living, on the gossiping judges, on the assembled mourners at the funeral service. This judgment begins on a comic note: the rituals in the house of mourning; the empty words and gestures; the irritation and impatience of visitors who would rather be at their evening card game than listen to the Church Reader, look at the reproachful expression on the dead man's face, and have to smell the faint odor of carbolic acid. Even objects have a way of interfering with the comfort of visitors. A rebellious spring in the ottoman keeps poking at the posterior of a family friend offering his condolences, while a supercilious dandy named Schwartz keeps toying nervously with his top hat, resentful not to be at his club or at some entertaining party. As for the widow, filled with affectations (she resorts to French to express her self-pity), her main concern is the cost of the plot in the cemetery and whether there is any way of persuading the government to increase the pension to which she is entitled.

In lonely contrast to these characters, Tolstoy offers us the refreshing peasant figure of Gerasim, the butler's young assistant who

served as a sick nurse to Ivan Ilych during his long illness, never flinching from the most distasteful chores and attending to the most repelling ministrations willingly and cheerfully. One of the visitors is struck by the simplicity of his words as he refers to death in tones quite different from the stilted speech of the assembled mourners. "It's God's will. We shall all come to it some day." Unlike the dandy Schwartz and all those who choose to think of themselves as being "above it all," Gerasim accepts nature's laws with a redemptive simplicity reminiscent of Montaigne's peasant who faces death as an integral part of life. Tolstoy stresses Gerasim's strong hands and sturdy teeth—"the even white teeth of a healthy peasant." But the image of the teeth is ambivalent. Behind the symbol of vital force there lurks the skeleton's grin.

It is not the masked presence of this grin, however, that makes Ivan's life so "ordinary" and "terrible"; it is the extent to which, oblivious to death and to the reality of the human condition, he succeeds in dehumanizing his life as he climbs the professional ladder—through ambition, automatic responses, and the illusion of power. He becomes a virtuoso in the art of separating human and official relations, extending even beyond the courtroom the theatricality of courtroom poses and gestures. The truth is that, past a certain point, there is no human relation to safeguard. Life itself has been devitalized, and the individual conscience anesthetized. Even pleasures accessible to Ivan have been corrupted by vanity in the two senses of the word: inflated pride and emptiness. As for Ivan's awareness of his judicial power to ruin anybody he wishes to ruin, Tolstoy sees this not only as a typical illusion of power, but as a generalized affliction spread well beyond the profession of magistrate.

The irony is that when Ivan Ilych becomes sick, the corporation of doctors treats him exactly the way he used to treat the petitioners and the accused in the law courts. The medical luminaries give themselves important airs, proud of their diagnoses that turn out to be ludicrously inadequate and contradictory. They talk about chronic catarrh and a floating kidney, and show themselves indifferent to his suffering. Ivan Ilych becomes the victim of his own game. While for

him his illness is a matter of life or death, the doctors regard him as an interesting "case," almost like an accused man on trial.

More terrible even than a grave illness is the disease of living. "*Rien n'est pire que la vie*" (nothing is worse than life), writes Jacques Chardonne in his preface to a French edition of the story. When Ivan Ilych takes a leave of absence, and can no longer during those long months of idleness avoid facing himself, he falls prey to a deep *tosca*, the Russian word for ennui or melancholy. This *tosca* cannot be dismissed as mere boredom. It is nothing short of *tedium vitae*: a weariness of life, a profound feeling of futility and disgust, leading to depression. In time, not even the habitual derivatives—his professional routine, his social life, his bridge games—are of any help. Once again, one may wish to recall Pascal, who measured human misery in terms of the compulsion to seek escape and oblivion through *divertissements*, or distractions. "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, humans have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things." (T. S. Eliot surely remembered Pascal's denunciation of *divertissements* when, in "Four Quartets," he described the dejected figures "distracted from distraction by distraction.") In Tolstoy's story, *tosca* and the misery of distractions are ultimately linked to Ivan's need to condemn his own life and the life of those around him. This need comes to a head in the devastating scene in chapter eight, where Ivan Ilych, lying in bed—he now knows for sure that he is dying—watches his wife, his daughter, and her fiancé prepare to leave for an evening at the theater. His daughter's décolleté and "exposed flesh," her fiancé's strong thighs and elegant gloves, his wife's shallow remarks as she blabbers about Sarah Bernhardt, bring home the bodily appetites of the living, their selfishness and materialism, their impatience with the sick man, their deceptions and outright lies as they deal with the dying man. These lies grow more flagrant, from section to section, as Ivan's illness progresses.



This leads us to the story's temporal symbolism, which may well hold the key to its multiple levels of meaning. "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is divided into twelve sections or minichapters. That number is traditionally significant: the twelve books of the Minor Prophets, the Twelve Tables of Roman Law, the twelve disciples of Christ, the twelve victorious battles of King Arthur, Twelfth Night or the eve of Epiphany. And more important to the structural organization of Tolstoy's story: the twelve months of the year and the twelve hours on the face of the clock, both of which suggest a cyclical and recurrent pattern, a pattern of circularity, retrieval, and continuity that links the beginning to the end and the end to the beginning.

The image of the clock is indeed congruous. Time is running out. And if we examine the story's temporal scheme, it becomes clear that its crucial articulations correspond to the four cardinal points of the dial on a clock, namely the numbers 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Chapter three: Ivan Ilych believes that he has reached the height of success. He has been appointed to a rank two steps ahead of his former colleagues, and is now receiving a salary of five thousand rubles. His ill humor has vanished and he feels "completely happy." This sense of happiness is illusory and short lived. In the process of showing his upholsterer how he wants the hangings of the drawing-room curtain draped, he slips from a ladder and hits his side hard against the knob of the window frame. He will not recover from the injury. The clock is ticking inexorably.

Chapter six: Ivan is now very sick and faces the reality of death. The first sentence puts it starkly: "Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continual despair." It is at this point that he remembers the schoolbook syllogism about Caius being a man and therefore mortal. Still he clings to the illusion of an irreplaceable self, immune from Caius's fate. Gustily, he recalls the little boy he was, the little Vanya busy with his toys, the smell of his striped leather ball, the touch of his mother's hand, the rustle of her silk dress. In vain. *It/Ona* forces him to stare into the face of the unavoidable. There are no screens to protect him.

Chapter nine: Ivan has reached the bottom of despair. It is as

though he had been thrust into a narrow, deep black sack. He weeps like a child and cries out his misery at being tormented and abandoned by God. The biblical echoes are unmistakable, and are made even more striking because the transition from chapter six to chapter nine closely parallels the transition from the sixth to the ninth hour of the crucifixion as recounted by Matthew and Mark. "And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?* My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This moment of Christ's anguish and sense of utter abandonment at the ninth hour is also his most "human" moment, though the context of the Passion does not allow for despair. Resurrection is part of that story.

Chapter twelve: This chapter corresponds to the last hour. The clock has come full circle. It is at this precise point that Ivan falls through the bottom of the black sack. But instead of finding darkness, "at the bottom was a light." And again: "In place of death there was light." The twelfth hour is the moment of the Epiphany.

This final page shows Tolstoy at his best in creating a climate of doubt, if not undecidability. His tone is far from preachy. In describing the death vision of Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy shrewdly allowed for considerable ambivalence. A strictly clinical reading of these last moments could attribute the images in Ivan Ilych's mind—the black sack, falling through its bottom, the encounter with the light from below—to incoherent feverish hallucinations. On the other hand, a symbolic reading of these flashes in the night just as easily translates the single instant into a changeless time, hinting at a last-minute revelatory insight into the supernatural. The final page can stand as an encounter with nothingness or as a metaphor of revelation.

Tolstoy's figurative patterns in the final pages serve such a theme of revelation. The most significant of these patterns is a rhetoric of reversals, or inversions, as when Ivan surprisingly finds the light at the bottom of the dark sack. Normally one assumes that the light comes from above. It is precisely this type of inversion that is already at work in chapter nine, where Ivan, in despair, begins to

question the kind of life he has led and indulges in self-indictment. He now sees that he has lived according to a tragic paradox: "It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined that I was going up."

This principle of vertical inversion also works along a horizontal axis, by way of a train metaphor—a favored image of death in Tolstoy's work (see *Anna Karenina*)—precisely when Ivan unexpectedly finds the light at the very bottom: "What had happened to him was like the sensation one sometimes experiences in a railway carriage when one thinks one is going backwards while one is really going forwards."

These images of inversion or reversal associated at the end with the discovery of a light are especially meaningful because they imply a breakthrough. Ivan in his last moments desperately wants to force his way through an obstacle and cross a threshold. In his delirium, Ivan Ilych has great difficulty articulating words clearly. Trying to talk to his wife so as to ask for her forgiveness (he feels sorry for both himself and for her), wanting to say the word "forgive" (in Russian: *prostee*), he mumbles instead *propoostee*—which means "let it pass," but also "let me go through." Ralph E. Matlaw gives this as an illustration of Tolstoy's great stylistic subtlety. But far more than stylistic subtlety is involved. The desire to forgive and the yearning to crash through the obstacle merge in the mystery of language, communication, and transcendence. Ivan Ilych is dimly aware of the mystery of his mispronounced words. He feels that he may not be understood by his wife and son, but he knows that his words will be understood by one who matters. (In Russian the reference to "the One" is not as heavy-handed as in the translation). The mystery of speechlessness corresponds to the unnamable nature of "It" and of "the One."

From self-love to pity and compassion—the trajectory is immense. Yet the ultimate flash of joy is experienced in a single instant—an *Augenblick* that is out of time and negates death: "In place of death there was light." Ivan Ilych's last words to himself before drawing his last breath are at the same time vague and explicit. "Death is finished. . . it is no more."

These words also sound quite literary and faintly intertextual.

The narrator (to varying degrees always distinct from the person of the author) does not let on that he is even dimly aware of a long tradition of denying nothingness and despair, of proclaiming the inefficacy of death. Certainly Tolstoy was well acquainted with this tradition. Did he know John Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud. . ."? Donne's final cry of victory over death would surely have had a deep resonance in a sensibility such as Tolstoy's, a sensibility so haunted by the terror of dying. "Death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die!" Tolstoy, from behind the narrative voice, may well have remembered these or similar lines as he wrote the ultimate sentences of his story.

But whatever Tolstoy's unstated literary references may have been, the ending of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" provides further evidence that the seemingly stable authorial voice, which all along fuses the subjective and the objective, allows for conflicting levels of meaning, as well as a good measure of ambivalence.

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